Newsletter of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh
New Series Volume 12 Number 5 May 2015

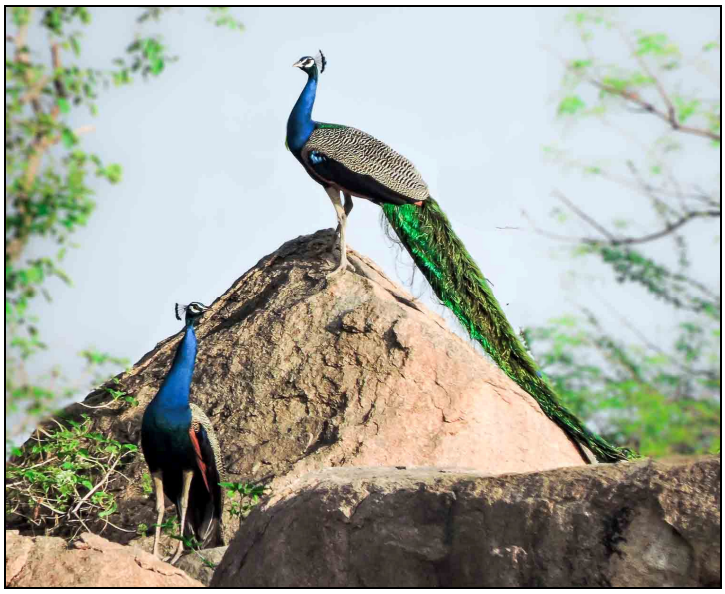
FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 17th May 2015: Qutubshahi Tombs. Meeting point: Punjagutta (opp. Mangatrai Pearls), 6.00AM.

A popular tourist destination, the Qutubshahi Tombs also have a good amount of forest and shrub cover, and can be expected to yield a good selection of bird sightings.

This will be a half-day trip. For further details and to co-ordinate, please contact Ms. Surekha Aitabathula (99490-38532).

Trip Report – Nehru Zoological Park, 20 April, 2015

Sagarika Melkote



Indian Peafowl (Photo: Gunbir Singh)

A bird-watching trip to the Nehru Zoological Park would have sounded pretty incongruous to most of us, but when we were told that we were not going to be looking at the caged variety, our curiosity was piqued.

The Curator of the Zoo, Mr. Ramakrishna Rao, had made arrangements for the BSAP members to visit the Zoo on a Monday, which is, officially, the weekly holiday for the Zoo. The Zoo, with its vast expanse of greenery, water bodies and varied habitat, is home to many a species and he was sure we would it find worth our while.

The trip to the Zoo, originally scheduled for April 13, had to be called off on account of heavy rain. Consequently, Mr. Ramakrishna graciously extended the invite for the following week. Being the die-hard birdwatchers that we are, many of us took the first half of the day off, notwithstanding the fact that it was Monday, the beginning of the working week! This was evidenced by the fact that there was a record turnout of almost 25 members, including several newbies.

Once at the Zoo, we were met and welcomed by Mr. Ramakrishna, who had very kindly arranged for the Zoo's battery-operated vehicles to take our teams around unexplored areas of the Zoo, many of which are out of bounds for the general public. We were even going to do a round of the Lion Safari area - the big cats, we were assured, were locked up in enclosures on Mondays. He also assigned a Zoo staffer to each vehicle to act as guide.

With great expectations, and near-perfect weather, the teams set off in different directions , in the 'green' vehicles. Our first stop was near the 'reptile house', a vast open space fringed by tall trees in abundant numbers. What the place might have lacked in variety, it made up for in terms of sheer numbers.

Rose-ringed Parakeet (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

Uncountable Common Mynas, Crows, Rose-ringed Parakeets, Red-vented Bulbuls, Coppersmith Barbets and Yellow-billed Babblers flew around in reckless abandon. The highlight was the spotting of the nests of the Rose-ringed Parakeet and the Common Myna in the trees, both housing inquisitive chicks popping their heads out for a peek every now and then! Another look upwards and we saw the beauteous Golden Orioles, whose sex ratio was either completely skewed or the male of this species was maintaining a proper harem - there was one male amidst every 5-6 females!

Black Kite (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

Indian Peafowl roamed free, as if without a care in the world, and Black Kites screeched and swooped down now and then.

Black-crowned Night Heron (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

Black-crowned Night Herons in the crocodile enclosures made a striking sight, especially as they stood absolutely still on the water's edge, pretty much like the crocodiles themselves. The wait paid off for one heron as he managed to snag a really big fish. For a while, it seemed to us observers that he'd really bitten off more than he could chew, as he struggled to ingest the fish. After a while, he emerged victorious - we could almost hear him burp!

Painted Stork (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

Further ahead, en route to Spot no. 2, several Painted Storks, assorted Egrets and more Night Herons came to alight at a spot which the zoo authorities call the 'Bird School'.

Little Egret (Photo: Gunbir Singh)

A solitary Rufous Treepie offered us a brief glimpse before flying off to attend to more important things.

Rufous Treepie (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

Spot no. 2 turned out to be a water body. It didn't disappoint, as scores of Cormorants, Grey Herons and Little Grebes made their appearance. A whole flock of Lesser Whistling-ducks basked in the sun on a rock, and a Purple Swamphen strolled nonchalantly across the road.

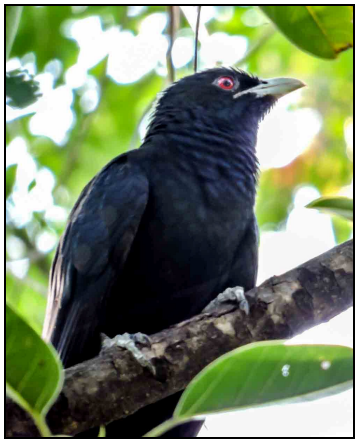
Lesser Whistling-duck (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

On the opposite side, a smaller water body yielded Black-winged Stilts, Spot-billed Ducks, Kingfishers of three varieties and a lone Black-headed Ibis. Cinnamon and Yellow Bitterns made their appearance, striking a chord in all of us.

Oriental Magpie Robin (Photo: Gunbir Singh)

Shortly thereafter, a delicious breakfast appeared as if by magic, courtesy the Curator's office, and we all tucked in hungrily before venturing further.

The much awaited foray into the Lion Safari was preceded by nervous enquiry from most of us about whether all the big cats were safely locked up. On assurance that each and every one of them was accounted for, we entered the Safari area. The privilege of roaming around the Safari area in an open vehicle is something that few can dream of.



Asian Koel (Photo: Gunbir Singh)

Inside the Safari area, thick with dry scrub forest, Green Bee-eaters flew round and round. Cupid seemed to be working his spell here, as we saw couples of the Asian Koel and the Indian Robin spending quality time together. A rustle of dry leaves underfoot, and out slithered a longish Rat Snake. The proverbial serpent in the Garden of Eden perhaps? Not quite, as he seemed to be happy minding his business, as did the couples in the trees above. We left them to it and made our way out.

There is a certain spot in the Zoo, which is said to be the haunt of the Spotted Owlet; unfortunately, we didn't spot any there. On our last leg, on the way out from the Safari, we were remarking to one another about how we missed seeing the Spotted Owlets when, as if on cue, one look upwards yielded handsome reward - the sight of a Spotted Owlet chick, staring out of a hole in the tree.

Spotted Owlet chick (Photo: Gunbir Singh)

We yelled for the driver to stop, and as a cascading effect all the vehicles behind screeched to a halt. Not only was there a chick in the nest, there were a couple of adults flitting about, and they even obliged by posing for the photographers in the group!

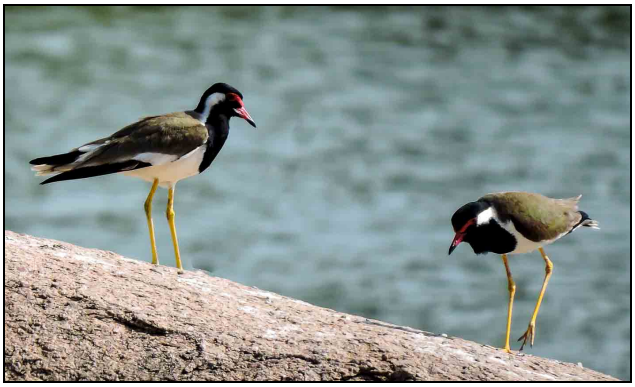
Spotted Owlet (Photo: Dheeraj Chavadi)

A walk on the bund abutting the Mir Alam Tank, courtesy special permission of the Curator, marked the end of our trip. The icing on the cake, so to say, was the spotting of some Baya Weavers, and their nests, alongside the bund.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, it was a weary but extremely satisfied group of birders that gathered at the exit gate of the Zoo.

As a birder, one would not want to make a distinction between 'Common' and 'Rare' birds - while the Zoo trip may not have produced any lifers, the frequency of sightings and the abundance of numbers did it for us, not to speak of the privilege of venturing into the areas that are normally out of bounds for the general public.

We would, therefore, like to thank Mr. Ramakrishna Rao for his support in organizing this memorable trip, and look forward to going back again soon.



Red-wattled Lapwing (Photo: Gunbir Singh)

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Report – KBR National Park, 29th April 2015

Text: Shafaat Ulla, Photos: Gunbir Singh

Kasu Brahmananda Reddy National Park (KBR Park), situated in the heart of Hyderabad in the Banjara Hills area, is spread over an area of 143 Hectares with vegetation that includes trees and thorn brush that is typical of the Deccan plateau. KBR Park is under the control of the Telangana Forest Department and is well protected and maintained. Walkers are allowed to walk on dedicated paths in a small part of the park; the rest of the Park (about 90%) is a conservation zone, where the public is not allowed to enter.

The DFO, Mr. Mohan, had initiated a survey of the flora and fauna of the Park and had requested BSAP members to volunteer for the job and assist the Forest Department officials. Although it was a working day, about 18 of us turned up promptly at 6.30AM.

For the survey, the park had been divided into ten routes, with a forest official allocated to each. We also, therefore, divided ourselves into ten groups of ones and twos, and joined the officials of the various routes. Sagarika, Nandu and I joined Route No.5.

The Forest Department officials had been given specially-designed Data Sheets to be filled up during the survey. We dispersed to our designated starting points, and all the groups started walking simultaneously at 7.00AM, to avoid duplication of counting. It turned out to be a very enjoyable activity, as we were in the conservation zone which we had never seen before.

White-browed Bulbul

By about 8.30AM, we were done with the survey, and one by one the groups trooped back in to the Education Centre, and submitted the Data Sheets which the department would collate later.

The highlight of the survey was the sighting of an Indian Pitta by Ajit Kumar and Samuel. This may well be the first record of the Indian Pitta being reported from KBR Park. A few other species of birds that were sighted were Spotted Owlet, Golden Oriole, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, White-browed Bulbul, Grey Francolin, etc., to name a few.

Hot breakfast and tea was waiting for us, which we needed badly! Therefore, after a quick group-photo session, we did full justice to the breakfast and, having thanked the DFO profusely for his hospitality, dispersed by about 10.00AM.

Common Iora

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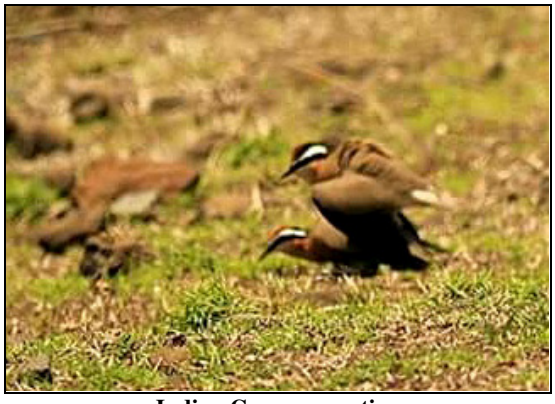
Variations in the breeding season of the Indian Courser (part-II)

Humayun Taher, Bindu Madhavi Racherla, Sharada Annamaraju,
M Lawrence, Amritha Lawrence

In our earlier article entitled "Variations in the Breeding Season of the Indian Courser" (Taher *et. al.* 2015), published in the March 2015 issue of the PITTA, we had requested BSAP members to contribute any additional information pertaining to breeding or nesting records of this interesting species of ground bird.



Indian Coursers mating
(Photo courtesy: Santosh Attreya)

As a result of this request, on 21st April 2015, one of us (HT) received a note and photograph from Amritha Lawrence (pers. comm. vide message dated 21-4-2015) showing a pair of Indian Coursers in mating posture. This photograph was taken on 19th April 2015 at a spot some 50+ km. away from Hyderabad city.

If we compare these dates with our observations in January (2014 and 2015), and with the breeding season mentioned in published literature, it seems likely that the breeding season of the Indian Courser is more long-drawn than was previously known. Chicks have been recorded as early as the month of January and now, towards the end of April, mating has been observed. Exact gestation period statistics are not known, but generally there would be an interval of 10 to 14 days between mating and egg-laying. Even if we discount that, the mating taking place in April substantiates the breeding season mentioned in the Handbook of the Birds of the Indian Sub-continent (Ali & Ripley, 1987) which is "…chiefly March to August. Some seasonal variation."

Indian Courser juvenile
(Photo: Humayun Taher)

Taking the recent observations into account, it therefore seems quite likely that the actual breeding season of the Indian Courser extends from January through to August. It is also possible that under favourable conditions, the birds may raise more than one brood. Besides, HT has recorded young birds (juveniles) in the month of September (13th September 2014); these young birds were fully fledged and seemed to have been hatched around the months of July or August.

It is interesting, and indeed very instructive, to note how even casual observations can add important facets to our knowledge of the avian world. We take this opportunity to thank Amritha for sending us the photograph of the mating Coursers, that allowed us to trace backwards and present the points we have raised above. We hope this will also encourage other members to write in with their own observations.

Literature cited:

1. Taher, Humayun, Bindu Madhavi Racherla, Sharada Annamaraju & M Lawrence, 2015. Variations in the breeding season of the Indian Courser. *Pitta New Series* 12 (3): 5.

2. Ali, S., & Ripley, S.D., 1987. *Compact handbook of the birds of India and Pakistan together with those of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka*. 2nd ed. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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Report - HSBC Bird Race, Hyderabad, 8th February 2015

Shafaat Ulla

Photo: Hemanth Kumar

It was a pleasant Sunday morning when the sixth edition of the Bird Race was slated to be flagged off from Hotel The Plaza, Begumpet.

An annual event sponsored by HSBC, and promoted by Yuhina Eco-Media of Mumbai, these races are held in several other cities also. In Hyderabad, the race is jointly organised by BSAP and Great Hyderabad Adventure Club (GHAC).

Photo: Mahipal Rao

This year too, as always, the response was overwhelming - the total number of participants was 88, including 21 ladies, a record indeed!

The participants were divided into 23 teams, and the team vehicles were flagged off promptly at 7:00AM by Diyanat of GHAC, after they had been given their breakfast hampers and log books. They were free to go wherever they wanted, as long as they returned by 5:30PM to the Hotel, and submitted their log books to the judges for scrutiny.

The judges, viz. Mr. Ramakrishna Rao (presently Curator, Nehru Zoological Park), JVD Moorty and Humayun Taher, are all Life Members of our Society and experienced birders. They collected all the log books and got down to the task of checking and grading them according to the number of bird species seen.

While the judges were busy with their task, the evening function started with the joint welcome address by our President Aasheesh and Diyanat, President, GHAC. This was followed by a few words by Mr. Sam Alex, Branch Head, HSBC, and finally a very nice speech by the Chief Guest, Mr. G.V. Prasad, Co-Chairman & CEO, Dr. Reddy's Laboratories Ltd, and a Life member of BSAP. After this, the Captains of each team were requested to come with their team members and say a few words about their experiences of the day. This was most interesting and a lot of fun.

This time around, there were no prizes. Instead, each participant was given a pen set with HSBC logo. This was very much appreciated by one and all. Finally the Vote of Thanks was given by Surekha, followed by a sumptuous dinner.

Results:

Team / Members	No. of species	Bird of the Day
MUNIAS - Sudhir, Anita, Sathwik, Gowthama	146	Crested Treeswift
PITTAS - Mahipal, Gulshan, Kalpana, Santosh	140	Asian Paradise-flycatcher
FALCONS - Asif, Hemant, Siddharth, Ashwin	131	Eurasian Blackbird

Some photos taken during the Bird Race:

Greater Flamingo (Photo: Hemanth Kumar)

Blue-faced Malkoha (Photo: Hemanth Kumar)

Red Avadavat (Photo: Hemanth Kumar)

Blue-tailed Bee-eater
(Photo: Hemanth Kumar)

Crested Hawk Eagle (Photo: Hemanth Kumar)

Crested Serpent Eagle (Photo: Hemanth Kumar)

Red-wattled Lapwing (Photo: Hemanth Kumar)

Rufous Treepie (Photo: Hemanth Kumar)

Bronze-winged Jacana juvenile (Photo: Hemanth Kumar)

Bar-headed Goose (Photo: Hemanth Kumar)

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Bird of the Month

Text and photo: Umesh Mani

Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*)

Purple Heron (Chennai, 14-04-2015)

Order: Pelecaniformes
Family: Ardeidae
Genus: *Ardea*
Species: *A. purpurea*
Size: 78-90 cm

Description &distribution: The Purple Heron is a large member of the heron family, Ardeidae. Its wingspan can range between 120-152 cm. Tall and slender, the Purple Heron is delicately coloured. The adult has a chestnut head and neck with a black stripe down the sides, slate-grey mantle and upperwing-coverts, and a dark chestnut belly and underwing-coverts. Legs and feet are dull yellow. The crown has two long black scapular plumes, which develop chestnut-buff tips during breeding. The long, fine bill is yellow, and becomes brighter yellow during breeding season. At rest, it shows a deep chestnut shoulder-patch. The juvenile has a buffish neck, black crown and brownish mantle. The upperwing-coverts are also brownish with rufous-buff fringes.

The Purple Heron breeds in Africa, southern and central Europe, and southern and eastern Asia. Northern Asian populations winter in more southern parts of Asia, whereas the European populations migrate to Africa in winter. Four sub-species are recognized: *A. p. purpurea*, the nominate race, found in Africa, Europe (north, to the Netherlands), and south-western Asia (east to Kazakhstan); *A. p. manilensis*, found in Asia from Pakistan east to Philippines and Indonesia, and north to parts of Russia; *A. p. madagascariensis*, found in Madagascar; and *A. p. bournei*, found in Cape Verde islands. This last race, *A. p. bournei*, is also known as Bourne's Heron, and is considered by some authors as a part of A. p. purpurea, and as a distinct species *Ardea bournei*, by some others.

Behaviour: The Purple Heron is not a gregarious bird, and is usually seen singly or in very small groups. It prefers inland waters with tall cover. It tends to keep within reed-beds - more so than other herons - and can be quite inconspicuous, often being noticed only when it moves or flies. It feeds in shallow water, and can stay motionless for fairly long intervals, while waiting for prey to approach closer; it may also slowly stalk its prey. Its diet is wide, and includes frogs, fish, rodents, salamanders, snakes, insects, spiders and even small birds.

Its flight is slow and ponderous. In flight, its neck is retracted, like most herons and bitterns, but the bulge of the recoiled snake-like neck is much more pronounced than, say, the Grey Heron; protruding feet seem large, and underwing-coverts are purplish in adult and buff in juvenile birds.

Nesting: In north Africa and Europe, the Purple Heron breeds from around April to June. In north Asia, it breeds from June to October, and further south, the breeding season may vary with the rainy season cycle. It nests gregariously, forming nesting colonies in reed-beds or trees close to large lakes, marshes or other wetlands. The nest is a large stick nest, often balanced on folded-over reeds. The typical clutch consists of 2-8 pale blue-green eggs, with one clutch per year being the norm, though replacement clutches can occur. Both parents participate in incubation duties.

Local name: The Purple Heron is known as *'nari'* or *'lal anjan'* in Hindi, *'yerra narayana pakshi'* in Telugu and '*chen naarai'* in Tamil.

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Our experience at Bird Race 2015

Sagarika Melkote

The word "bird race" has always evoked mixed reactions from people around me - amusement, curiosity, incredulousness and sometimes, plain "are you nuts?" looks. One person actually asked me if we let caged birds free and track them to see which one flies fastest! She was stunned into an open-mouthed silence when I told her that it was BSAP's annual jamboree, where we form teams and rush around the twin cities trying to spot as many bird species as possible.

And so, the 2015 bird race was no different - teams congregated bright and early at the venue, raring to go. What I thought was our very imaginative team name "Inglorious Bustards" was abruptly shortened to "Eagles" by the Honorary Secretary, who told me save my imagination for another time. The unexpected absence of our fourth team member was quickly filled in by a lady who'd come all the way from Goa.

So there we were, two participants from previous bird races (Vinay & self), one newbie (Ravi) and the lady from Goa (Tallulah). With teams around us all huddling and speaking in hushed whispers, we too, followed suit and tried to strategize. A exchange of hot words and a couple of arguments later, we had our routes all mapped out, ready to go. Vinay would drive, Ravi and I would keep our eyes peeled and Tallulah would do likewise in her own car, tailing us. A visibly excited Ravi said that we must spot at least one species of Eagle, to justify our team name.

Race flagged off, we headed straight to Narsapur forest, stopping at a couple of water bodies on the way. Pretty fruitful because we had a list of about 15 common species by the time we hit the forest.

Narsapur forest has never failed to amaze - with an abundance of Long-tailed Shrikes and Red Avadavats, the water body within the forest threw in its share of Openbills, Grey Herons, Stilts, Sandpipers, Terns, Spotbills, Jacanas, Grebes, Teals, Kingfishers, not to mention an amphibian's shell - probably that of an Indian Pond Terrapin, promptly packed into his backpack by Ravi! Tallulah, unfortunately, had to catch an afternoon flight back to Goa and left at this juncture, albeit with some degree of reluctance.

The walk back from the lake yielded a female Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark, almost invisible in its camouflage but spotted, nevertheless, by Ravi, the human optical scanner. Binoculars are wasted on the man, he managed to spot a Paradise-flycatcher in a bamboo thicket and a Crested Serpent Eagle in a tree nearly 300 metres away, before Vinay and I pinned it down with our binoculars!

We left Narsapur, pretty satisfied with ourselves; our bird list had grown considerably and we even had one species of Eagle in it, doing justice to our team name. The plan now was head out to Gandipet and KBR Park after that. It's a fact that sometimes even the best laid plans go wrong. Somewhere, after getting onto the highway and coming to an agreement about using Google maps, we exited onto what we thought was the right bypass road. Google continued to reassure us that we were on the right track, while in fact we had no idea where we were. Maybe it was a blessing in disguise, for we found ourselves on a country road, completely devoid of traffic, surrounded by fields. Pied Bushchat, Brown Shrikes and a male Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark were added to the list. Hunger was starting to gnaw at our insides, when the unexpected happened.

"There is a huge raptor on that tree…" from Ravi, of course.

Brakes screeched, the car stopped just short of a huge ditch…

About 300 metres off the road, on a tree shorn of leaves, was perched this magnificent specimen. Binoculars trained on him, Ravi and I were at a complete loss about its id. Frenzied references to the field guide followed, more features were observed and noted, field guide referred to again. All the while, His Royal Highness just sat still, taking in the surroundings, least bothered that he was the current object of interest and speculation. Once in a way, he would turn and show off his left profile, then his right and once, for our benefit, he even fluffed himself! About fifteen minutes passed before we arrived at a consensus - the raptor was, beyond all doubt, the Short-toed Snake Eagle - AND a LIFER for all of us! Right there, we made the decision - this raptor would be our "Bird of the Day".

As if on cue, the raptor then spread its wings, rose into the air and glided smoothly out of sight. We silently thanked him for staying long enough for us to identify him.

Hunger pangs forgotten, we continued along the same road, still believing Google. Some distance ahead, I spotted a fairly huge bird (or birds) flying into a corn field off the road. Vinay applied the brakes again at my shout; it's just as well that we were on these country roads with no traffic, the way we were stopping as and when we felt like it. Ravi and I hopped off to take a closer look. Once near the corn field, Ravi went a little ahead and peeped into the rows of corn.

"There is a pig here…are you sure you saw a bird?"

Now, I may not possess laser scanners for eyes but I was pretty sure I saw a big bird (or birds). Anyway, with Ravi's confirmation that there was a pig in the corn field, I started to doubt myself and the two of us walked back to the car.

Maybe we were two minds with one thought, because, we both stopped suddenly. I knew what Ravi was thinking - pigs do not fly and whatever I saw, very definitely flew into the cornfield. We went back for a second look, and, lo and behold, there were about 5 or 6 peafowl in the field!

Thrilled that our national bird made it to our list, we followed the road again. Google didn't really let us down and we found ourselves in familiar Shankarpalli, where we sat down to a very late lunch. Time constraints meant we had to be back at the

reporting venue to submit our list. The list by itself, looked pretty impressive; we had about 70 species listed.

Shortly we were back at the venue, exchanging notes with the others, sharing experiences, the sound of laughter and cheery voices filling the hall. Some folks had notched up lists of over 130 species, and everyone had something memorable to share.

Not that it mattered - prize or no prize, the annual Bird Race is a unique exercise, and it's pretty much guaranteed that you will spot a species that you have never seen before, given the time you spend out on the field.

For Vinay and me, this was the third year of participation in the Bird Race and every year, we had consistently averaged 68-70 species. When it was our turn to speak, we timidly asked if there were prizes to be had for consistency and were told, regretfully, that there were none!

And for that, I believe, every birder worth his salt must try it at least once.

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Bird Humour

(contributed by JVD Moorty)

(From Times of India, date not available)

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